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Kalamazoo Is Where Kalamazoo Is

Janet Kauffman

KALAMAZOO EATS SNOW. In that way, he eats clouds. But that is only possible in winter.

This man called Kalamazoo, because of his hometown, spends hours outside—snow, sun, whatever. He works, sure, but who doesn't?

"You're a dumb fuck," Linda says. "As are we all," she adds.

All right, it's Wednesday, with no snow. It's summer in fact. The middle of summer. And out the door, this man Kalamazoo—and that is me—sees a blue-painted diner with the word *Karl's* over the door, and a weedfield and a streetcorner. He does not see molten rock, although it's down there, somewhere, or snipers holed up in the hills.

When Kalamazoo talks, he says *I*, like anybody else. But when he talks to himself, he doesn't. *I* is loud, ridiculous. Too much the shape of Popeye's arm. An I-beam. When he thinks, Kalamazoo doesn't say, *I think therefore I am*. He thinks in the third person. It's awkward. Appropriate. But *me* is tolerable—the lower case. It's no problem to think *me*, my day with Linda, for instance.

"Come over here," Linda says in the diner. She sits at the counter. "I've got a couple of questions for you, Kalamazoo." She's wearing jeans and a black t-shirt and her steel-toed black shoes. She puts a shoe on the chrome-sided stool next to her and kicks it into a spin. Linda is an engineer, and she has offered Kalamazoo work from time to time, which he has taken. With a hard hat on his head, he can laugh at himself. "You look *toyish*!" Linda says. "As do we all," she adds.

Linda spins around on the stool at the counter, a couple of times, as if it's motorized. "What's the difference," she says, "between a man fucking a dog, and a dog fucking a man?"

Kalamazoo says, "I've seen that."

"Is one worse than the other, I mean?" Linda says.

Kalamazoo imagines a link between her dark frizzed hair and her way of thinking. She is tangled, brain to toe.

Kalamazoo's Daddy was bald, simple in thought. These two are two that Kalamazoo has loved—Linda right here, his Daddy long ago. Kalamazoo

shunts between these two, their voices, this way, that way. He's somewhere in the middle.

"Just put your finger on today's date," his Daddy said, the year Kalamazoo was a tall skinny kid and his Daddy was already fat in the belly, already bald. The calendar hung on the kitchen door, with a Persian cat picture over the numbers, a red bow at the cat's neck.

"Good. That's today," Daddy said. "That's it. When today's past, it's past. Today won't ever lie ahead again, remember that. So just you do what your heart desires!"

Daddy loved each day so much it was hard to call him sentimental. He was beyond it. His eyes were moist.

"Go on," he said in his slow-down voice. "Just you do what your heart desires."

Kalamazoo nodded.

"What do you *really* want to do?" his Daddy asked.

"Well, walk around," Kalamazoo said. Even then he said that. "Look around. I don't know."

"That's fine," Daddy said. "I'm behind you on that, all the way."

"I don't mean for real," Linda says. "I mean to look at, in photographs. Is one worse than the other to look at? For a man to look at, I mean. Which is worse? Or which is funnier, if some guy wants a laugh? Is he supposed to feel sick and laugh, or what? Which is sicker? What's the difference, I mean? And which is worse?"

Kalamazoo looks at the dust floating in his coffee and says, "I've seen a dog fucking a dog."

"I don't mean for real! I'm not talking about that," Linda says. "I mean theoretically. *Theatrically!*" she says.

Outside the window, a line of ants climbs a stalk of Queen Anne's lace. Three ants on the white flowerhead, level as a floor, circle each other and track figure-eights, side-to-side, very complicated trails. They keep their distance from each other. Good for them. Then they walk over the edge—one, then all three—upside-down on the underside of the flower, in the spokedwork of the plant. This is not a dangerous activity, so far as Kalamazoo knows.

Beyond the weeds, at the streetcorner, a man holds his penis. He doesn't want to be seen. He's got a red t-shirt under a jacket, and it's 95 degrees.

Kalamazoo swings around on the stool. Across the street, he can see all

the way through his house, front to back. It's a stucco house, and there used to be a window, where he can't see, that opened into the branches of a white pine. Birds flew into the room, by mistake. He's afraid the house will be burned, maybe gone, the next time he looks.

The house had a kitchen at the back, with a knife on the counter, and his mother had her hand on it one day, but there was also that day just past her shoulder a square window that showed some color in the weeds outside—blue chicory, which would make it July, yellow sweet clover, and maybe that was loosestrife, the tall purple heads. Maybe it was. Air inside and outside the window looked the same both places, blurred, with a gauzy weight to it—maybe the window was open. In the humidity, colors ran together at the edges and even the windowsill wasn't a straight line. His mother lost her balance for a second and grabbed the countertop.

Kalamazoo spins around one way, Linda spins the other way. Linda sticks out her foot with the black shoe as a barrier and they both stop.

"Any one answer would be false," Kalamazoo says.

Karl, who owns the diner, walks through the swing door from the kitchen with his old percolator and fills up their cups.

"The street looks bad, doesn't it?" he says.

Linda stirs her coffee with a knife. On the surface of the coffee, a slick with an iridescent sheen breaks in two, then reconnects when she stirs it again.

"So, speculate. Which is worse? Take a stab," she says.

"Well, in Kalamazoo," Kalamazoo says, "I'd say fucking the dog."

"Too close to reality?" Linda says. She is smiling and her eyes squint almost shut.

Kalamazoo says, slow, because he has thought it before but never said it out loud, "The worst that a person *does* is worse than anything, even the worst, that happens *to* a person."

Karl the owner shakes his head.

"What? Maybe in *your* Kalamazoo," Linda says. "But we're way, way, way down the road."

"Kalamazoo is where Kalamazoo is."

Linda pats his arm. "Yeah, yeah. And we're here with you. But you're talking about real events, and I'm talking about picking up postcards, see, and looking at them. But that's all right. It was just a thought." She folds

her napkin in a small square and wipes up a ring of coffee from the counter. “How about a walk down the middle of the street?”

The light outside glares through a haze. Behind the stucco house, trees are dumped in a heap. The man on the corner has disappeared. Linda kicks some leaves.

“Under the leaves,” Kalamazoo says, “it’s anybody’s guess what’s going on.”

“Easier to predict, though,” Linda says, “than what’s going on under a roof.”

“Maybe you could work out a couple equations.”

“Maybe I could,” Linda says.

Linda takes Kalamazoo’s hand. Then she takes my arm. We look like a couple, out of Kalamazoo’s past.

Sometimes it’s hard on the ears—the blasting, the collapse of buildings, the heavy equipment cutting tread through asphalt. No one is running or screaming, that’s true.

The street’s torn up, and we walk down the middle. Linda’s black shoes are dusted all yellow. She pulls out her purple sunglass goggles, and when he looks at her, Kalamazoo sees himself in the bubble lenses, another twist to things—white shirt gone bluish, yellow hat chartreuse, violet sky.

Linda’s kicking up dust, and the midday heat hits hard. Everything’s blasted. The pipes in the ground are useless. Something might tunnel there, though. Beetles. Small ground squirrels could fit. They could live in there. Shit there. All that’s hard to imagine, and wormlife, too, but things are alive, six feet under. And more. Keep going, to the mess of molten rock—how far down? It flows and twists, all the time, no question about that. But colorless, you know, colorless.